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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000928

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: PATRIARCH SFEIR REPORTEDLY ATTEMPTS TO
BREAK THE DEADLOCK

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

11. (C) A respected intermediary who carries out dialogue between Patriarch Sfeir and Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah said that the Maronite religious leader has decided to get off the fence and support Nassib Lahoud as the principal Maronite candidate to replace President Emile Lahoud. Sfeir has reportedly conveyed Sfeir's proposal to Nasrallah to ensure that the Shia leader would remain neutral when it comes time to confront Michel Aoun. Nasrallah did not immediately endorse the choice of Nassib Lahoud, but asked for time to consider the idea. Sfeir is anxious that Aoun, when he learns of the maneuver, will try to aggressively block a Nassib Lahoud candidacy by appealing for Hizballah's support. Sfeir's strategy is to present Aoun with a united Christian front and eliminate the Hizballah factor. End summary.

12. (SBU) Emir Hares Chehab, Director of the Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue and a close confidant of Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, met poloff on March 23. Chehab is a former president of Maronite League who, through his inter-faith committee, has somewhat unexpectedly developed a workmanlike relationship with Nasrallah and other members of the Shia leadership. Chehab meets the patriarch on a weekly basis and has negotiated with Nasrallah frequently.

SFEIR REPORTEDLY CHOOSES NASSIB LAHOUD

13. (C) Hares Chehab said that after long deliberation (and much anxiety), the Maronite patriarch has decided to back the candidate he feels is best qualified to reduce communal tension and reconcile feuding political opponents: Nassib Lahoud. (Note: Nassib Lahoud, an estranged cousin of President Emile Lahoud, is a former pro-reform member of parliament who lost to an Aounist candidate in the May 2005 parliamentary election. An engineer, who made his wealth in construction in the Arabian peninsula, is widely acknowledged as a highly capable, honest politician who would enjoy cross-sectarian appeal. His principal drawbacks are two-fold. First, he lost his parliamentary seat in the Aoun sweep of Mount Lebanon, giving Aoun the ability to claim Nassib has no popular support. Second, he is related by marriage to the Saudi royal family, and as such, is suspected of being in their debt. End note.)

14. (C) According to Chehab, Patriarch Sfeir, who has had a troubled past with Michel Aoun (Aoun's supporters roughed up

the cardinal in 1989 in a late night raid and forced him to issue pro-Aoun statements), is concerned that unless his political flank is covered, Aoun will aggressively counter-attack using every tool available. To prevent this occurrence, Sfeir desires to neutralize Hizballah in the anticipated presidential donnybrook.

ELIMINATING THE HIZBALLAH FACTOR

15. (C) But Sfeir also recognizes that Nasrallah wants one, and only one, name from the Christian community, because although Lebanon's electoral system requires a two-thirds vote in parliament to elect a new president in the first round, a second round vote requires only a simple majority. This, in effect, takes away the ability of Hizballah to block a candidate they do not approve. As a result of this complex system, Sfeir realizes he can only cover his Shia flank if he can come up with one name.

16. (C) Chehab indicated he received Sfeir's approval to approach Nasrallah this week with the name of Nassib Lahoud. The intermediary said that Nasrallah was noncommittal, but was clearly interested. The Shia leader conveyed a message to Sfeir that he would need time to consider the proposal.

17. (C) If recourse to Hizballah can be denied to Michel Aoun, Chehab said the patriarch intends to encourage the remaining Maronite leaders to approach Aoun and ask him to stand aside in the interests of the community. In this calculation, Aoun would be faced with an alliance of the March 14 coalition and no avenue of escape to Hizballah and Amal. When asked about the timing of this strategy, Chehab said within weeks.

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COMMENT

18. (C) The scenario described by Emir Chehab is complex and requires steadfast behavior from the patriarch, which he has not always exhibited in the past. The other unknown is whether Michel Aoun won tacit support for his own candidacy from Nasrallah when they concluded their February 6 communique and announced a "cooperative alliance." On the other hand, it does solve the stalemated presidential situation with a deft maneuver that will likely catch Aoun off guard -- and without allies. Chehab believes Nasrallah will now surely consult with the Syrian regime, which will have to choose between the pro-reform, but not anti-Syrian, Nassib Lahoud or the nearly delegitimized President Lahoud. However, if Aoun is effectively denied the presidency he has sought so assiduously, the Siniora government will have to figure some way to bring him into the process -- or risk having a powerful, angry outsider who would constantly attack those holding authority. End comment.

FELTMAN